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Agriculture Protection Board
Advisory Leaflet No. 98
Agdex No. 675
July 1983
C.P. 13666

STARLINGS



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The starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), also known as the common or European starling, is one of the most numerous birds in the world. It originated in Europe and Asia and has since spread in those continents, with the development of agriculture, from the Arctic Circle to the Mediterranean and from Siberia to the Atlantic Ocean. In addition, many millions of starlings migrate southwards in winter reaching North Africa and India.

Starlings have become established in North America, South Africa and New Zealand. They were first introduced to Victoria in about 1860 and have since spread as far north as Queensland and west to the Western Australian border.

Starlings are medium sized birds, from 180 to 220 mm in length and weighing from 50 to 100 g. Adults have glossy black plumage with a purple and greenish sheen. Their wing and tail feathers are edged in buff. In the breeding season they acquire buff spots on their upper parts and white spots underneath. At that time their bill is bright yellow, fading to dusky in the non-breeding season. Immature birds are a dull grey-brown.

They may be recognised on the ground by their quick nervous look-

ing waddling gait; they do not hop. They fly by rapid wing movements interspersed by short glides. The wings are turned to act as air brakes when landing.

Their habitat ranges from urban to rural although they avoid dense forests and mountains. They are often seen associated with sheep and cattle, standing on the backs of grazing animals, feeding on parasites and insects disturbed during grazing.

Starlings are ground feeders. They consume nearly everything edible including insects, seeds, grain and fruit. They cause immense damage to fruit crops, in particular grapes and cherries and they attack winter sown cereals at germination. They also steal large amounts of feed from cattle and poultry feed lots.

In addition to the food they take, they spoil much more with their droppings, which also deface houses and other buildings. They may destroy trees as a result of their gregarious roosting habits either by their droppings or by sheer weight of numbers. They also cause severe crop and pasture damage in adjacent paddocks.

Starlings have been implicated in the spread of a number of diseases which affect man and farm animals. They also spread parasites, in particular

lice. Starlings are aggressive birds; they breed rapidly, forming flocks of thousands—even millions. In areas where they have become established they compete for food and nesting sites with native birds, in many cases displacing them.

In Australia starlings breed from July through to December. They may have up to three broods per year. They construct nests consisting of an untidy mass of straw or rubbish lined with soft grass, feathers or wool. Nests have been found in caves, on rocks, in buildings, shrubs and trees. They lay from four to eight pale blue eggs which hatch out in about 12 days. Fledglings leave the nest at about three weeks of age.

Because of their adaptability and aggressiveness to native birds and also their potential to cause damage to agriculture, starlings are declared birds (vermin) in Western Australia. Every effort is made to keep them out of the State and to destroy any birds which manage to cross into Western Australia.

Anyone seeing a bird which might be a starling is asked to contact the Agriculture Protection Board, Jarrah Road, South Perth, 6151, telephone (09) 367 0111 or any country office of the APB or the Department of Agriculture.